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Elisabeth E. Bennett

University of Georgia, USA

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Recommended Citation

Bennett, Elisabeth E. (2005). "Connections Between Organizational Culture and Knowledge Management," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2005/roundtables/1>

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Connections Between Organizational Culture and Knowledge Management

Elisabeth E. Bennett

University of Georgia, USA

In the present knowledge economy, Adult Education (AE) plays an important role in creating, distributing, and applying knowledge through research and practice. AE programs are considered to be political and ethical activities (Cervero & Wilson, 1995; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995) that often occur in organizational contexts, including academic, for-profit, and non-profit groups. Organizations tend to have a predominant outlook on knowledge that is part of organizational culture (OC) (Wikstrom & Normann, 1994). A new line of inquiry, Knowledge Management (KM), focuses on how knowledge is acquired, created, and distributed (Alvesson & Karreman, 2001; Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 2003) within organizations. Alavi and Tiwana (2003) suggest that KM has unexplored socio-cultural aspects. The purpose of this paper is to uncover connections between OC and KM theories that impact AE.

Knowledge Management (KM)

KM breaks knowledge into three parts: data, information, and knowledge (Bhatt, 2001; Drucker, 1989). Specialized knowledge is needed to transform data into information and endow it with relevance through interpretation (Drucker, 1989). KM involves tacit and explicit forms of knowledge (Choo, 1995; Nonaka, 1998). Tacit knowledge is difficult to uncover and is second nature. Explicit knowledge is more visible and often more technical in nature. Choo (1995) suggests tacit knowledge is connected to action and intuition. He also indicates background knowledge used to interpret information is part of organizational culture communicated through oral and verbal texts. Additionally, knowledge can be viewed as the kind or degree of understanding that is obtained through learning (Chakravarthy, McEvily, Doz, & Rau, 2003). Myers (1996) suggests knowledge can only be managed only to the extent that it has been captured in organizational process, systems, products, rules, and culture.

Organizational Culture (OC)

Organizations are complex social systems (Fenwick, 2000) in which the culture has a strong impact on workplace learning (Darrah, 1995) and performance (Kotter & Heskett, 1992). Traditional theories indicate that shared values and beliefs among members are central to organizational culture (Deal & Kennedy, 1992; Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Schein, 1992). Definitions of organizational culture can be as simple as 'the way things are done here' (Drennan, 1992) to the complex that includes almost all structures, behaviors, artifacts and knowledge bits that create ideological practice (Sentell, 1998). Schein (1992) theorized three levels of culture that reflect a continuum of the observable to the embedded. These levels are a) artifacts, b) espoused values, and c) shared tacit assumptions. Kotter & Heskett (1992) also believe that OC is multi-leveled with more or less embedded forms. Stackman, Pinder, and Connor (2000) see values as the building blocks for behavior and choice, and fundamental to OC. These values affect the interpretation and processing of information.

Connections between OC and KM

KM and OC are connected in two critical ways that create a dynamic of influence in day-to-day organizational activities. First, managing knowledge may help to maintain or change organizational culture since certain forms of OC can be captured in texts and artifacts. More explicit forms of cultural knowledge are more easily managed. Second, values, assumptions, and other forms of OC provide a frame of knowledge through which information is interpreted and applied if determined to be relevant. Because there are both tacit and explicit forms of knowledge in OC and KM, these connections can be overt or hidden.

Implications and Conclusion

The vast amount of information available today creates a challenge for organizations and for individuals to create, absorb, and apply that which will help them be successful while ignoring or forgetting the extraneous. The culture of an organization can act as a barrier to incorporating knowledge that is not valued. Systems of hierarchy and privilege, for example, may disregard information coming from local and underprivileged sources. AE institutions, too, may value certain forms of knowledge over others manifest in the research agenda. Adult learning programs within organizations may be the direct result of KM activities. Training is often seen as a way to disseminate new information. How instruction is designed could alter the organizational culture if it changes shared assumptions and norms or corporate ideology. Understanding the dynamics between OC and KM theories may help researchers and professionals in adult education critically appraise the political and ethical environment in which they produce and disseminate knowledge. This is especially challenging given the tacit forms of knowledge that are difficult to observe and analyze yet have immense power to influence new knowledge and learning.

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